

SELF-SPREADING AND SELF-IMPROVING: A STRATEGY FOR SCALING UP?

Paper for the Workshop on Scaling-Up NGO Impact

University of Manchester 8 - 10 January 1992

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A Fifth Strategy?

The background paper for this workshop (Edwards and Hulme 1992) has identified four main strategies for scaling-up or having a wider impact:

- * working with Government
- * operational expansion
- * lobbying and advocacy
- * supporting community level initiatives.

This paper asks whether there is a fifth strategy (self-spreading and self-improving) for scaling up impact. Perhaps this is no more than a footnote appended to the other four strategies, already implied by them. Or perhaps it deserves separate recognition. The reader will judge. For some NGOs, it is already a big part of their impact, even if not of their deliberate strategy, or even of their self-evaluation. The question is whether it should have more explicit recognition, and be pursued more deliberately.

The core of this paper, and the example on which this speculation is based, is experiences with rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA). Questions are raised concerning the further spread and improvement of these approaches and their methods. The wider issue is whether this is one example of a type of strategy through which NGOs can scale up their beneficial impact.

From RRA to PRA

Rapid rural appraisal (RRA) emerged in the late 1970s as approaches and methods of enquiry about rural life and conditions which tried to offset the anti-poverty biases of rural development tourism and to avoid the defects of questionnaire survey slavery (Chambers 1983). It stressed cost-effective trade-offs between quantity, accuracy, relevance and timeliness of information. Agroecosystem analysis (Gymantasiri et al 1980) contributed a powerful stream of innovation, and RRA came of age and acquired a mantle of some respectability not least through the international conference held at the pioneering University of Khon Kaen in 1985 (KKU 1987).

In 1988, the term participatory rural appraisal (PRA) gained currency in Kenya through the work of the National Environment Secretariat and Clark University, and through the work of the International Institute for Environment and Development in London. It was soon adopted elsewhere, especially in India. Whereas RRA is extractive, and outsiders own and process the information, PRA is participatory, and the ownership and analysis have come to be much more by rural people themselves. With PRA it is much less outsiders, and much more local people, who map, model, diagram, rank, score, observe, interview, analyse and plan.

To date, the experience with PRA in India, Nepal and elsewhere has been that rural people are far better at doing these things than outsiders have believed. On a personal note, to start with I thought we were experiencing exceptional one-off phenomena. But they were repeated again and again, in more and more contexts, and there can be little doubt now that we have witnessed a discovery, especially by NGO field staff but also by people working in Governments, that rural people have capabilities which earlier were little recognised or expressed (see e.g. RRA Notes 13).

This demands explanation. A working hypothesis is that outsiders (whether working in Government departments or NGOs) have consistently believed their knowledge to be superior, and so have consistently behaved in ways which put down the knowledge of rural people. We have found in the field that it is difficult for us outsiders to keep quiet, to avoid interrupting people, to abstain from criticism, to refrain from putting forward our own ideas. Anil Shah, of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, has invented "shoulder tapping" (Shah 1991) to correct this - a contract among outsiders that they will tap the shoulder of any colleague who criticises, asks a leading question, or puts forward his or her own ideas. The experience has been that for local people confidently and capably to put forward their own ideas, to express their own knowledge, to conduct their own analysis, and to assert their own priorities, "we" have to stand down, sit down, "hand over the stick", listen and learn, in ways which conflict with what our professional training has taught us, and with our self-esteem.

RRA and PRA: Contrasts in Spread

In their spread, RRA and PRA have had common features. Both began as heresies. Both rejected conventional professional norms and behaviour, and developed and shared new methods. Both have been espoused and developed by professionals with independent frames of mind. Both have faced opposition from professional establishments. But their mode of spread has differed in emphasis. The contrast can be overdrawn; but RRA has tended to be taught didactically while PRA in its South Asian form has tended to be learnt experientially.

In its popular form, RRA has tended to be seen as a repertoire of methods. These include sketch mapping, transects, semi-structured interviewing, and the management of team interactions. These methods can be and have been, taught in a formal manner, and manuals have been written. Training has sometimes taken quite long. A training programme in RRA conducted in Thailand took six weeks, and was considered too short.

PRA has spread rapidly in 1990 and 1991 in India. Four factors appear responsible for this.

First, it works. For outsiders it can be fascinating and fun. For villagers it can be enabling and empowering. There are many problems, especially in Government, but good experiences have been common among those NGOs that have tried it. Exaggeration must be avoided. But the words popular and powerful have been used to describe good PRA, and there is at least some justification for this.

Second, sharing has been part of the culture from the start. MYRADA, a large NGO based in Bangalore but working in a dozen or more districts, adopted and developed PRA, and spread it among other NGOs and Government by inviting and welcoming people to its field training exercises. These often entailed camping in villages for several days and nights, a total experience which had its own impact on participants. Other NGOs in parallel and in collaboration have done likewise, among them, in alphabetical order, ActionAid, Bangalore; Activists for Social Alternatives, Trichi; the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, Gujarat; Krishi Gram Vikas Kendra, Ranchi; Seva Bharati in West Bengal; SPEECH, Madurai; and Youth for Action, Hyderabad.

Third, spread has been through self-selecting individuals. In a five-day training conducted in Bihar in mid-1990, of some 20 participants about 5 rejected the approach, about 10 were interested and enthusiastic but probably did not introduce it in their organisations, and about 5 took it up, introduced it, and spread it. Ravi Jayakaran of KGVK and Kamal Kar of Seva Bharati are two who immediately introduced PRA in the NGOs which they headed, and who have since been providing training for NGO and Government staff alike; while Anup Sarkar of the Xavier Institute of Social Service, Ranchi, introduced PRA as the approach and methods for the fieldwork of all students.

Fourth, PRA has also spread fast because initial training is brief. In Government, one of the leading trainers, Somesh Kumar, would spend only a day or less on briefing about PRA before sending people into the field for three days and nights, followed by a day's debriefing (Kumar 1991). The emphasis was on behaviour and attitudes rather than methods. The effectiveness of this approach was indicated by an experiment he carried out (pers. comm.). In one training exercise, after initial orientation on behaviour and attitudes, one group was given only a sketchy idea of methods and sent straight out; another group was first given a stricter briefing on do's and don'ts for the methods before starting in the field. It was the first group, with less training, that did better.

At the risk of polarised caricature, the two training approaches can be summarised as follows:

	Didactic (some RRA)	Experiential (much PRA)
Aim	Learn methods	Change behaviour and attitudes
Duration	Longer (weeks)	Shorter (days)
Style	Classroom then practice	Practice, then reflection
Source of learning	Manuals, lectures	Trials, experiences
Location	More in the Classroom	More in the field
Learning experience	Intermittent Intellectual	Continuous, Experiential
Good performance seen to be through	Stepwise and correct application of rules	Flexible choice, adaptation and invention of methods

Teaching does not necessarily result in learning (see appendix B); but nor does experience either. Classroom teaching does not ensure practice; but nor does field exposure guarantee willing participation.

The implications for spread, though are different. A minority who become personally committed experientially to PRA are likely to go off and introduce it for others, and to do so quickly with relatively low time inputs. In contrast, those who become committed to an RRA mode may feel obliged to undertake lengthy training of others to bring them to the same point. RRA may then require special support and more costly training for its spread; while PRA may be self-spreading, through personal commitment and sharing.

RRA and PRA: quality assurance and improvement

Quality assurance in both RRA and PRA presents problems. The labels RRA and PRA can be used to describe many practices, good and bad.

Much good RRA has been done; but much that is bad has also been done in the name of RRA (see for example Pottier 1991 for a devastating critique of bad practice). Formal reviews and informal communications alike suggest that for all the strengths of RRA done well, the label has been used quite widely to legitimate shoddy practice. The reflex can then be to require training; but training itself can be undertaken uncritically, and is not necessarily good. The implicit model is degeneration with spread, and a constant need to evaluate and upgrade to maintain standards.

PRA as it has evolved in India and Nepal seems to present the potential for an alternative, self-improving mode of spread. To understand this, we have to see PRA as an approach and philosophy, a set of attitudes and behaviours. These include critical self-awareness, "handing over the stick" (passing the initiative to villagers), "they can do it" (having confidence that villagers can map, model, rank, score and so on), "embracing error" (welcoming and sharing mistakes as opportunities for learning), and "use your own best judgement at all times" (stressing personal responsibility). If these are part of the genes of PRA as it spreads, the question is whether wherever it is adopted, it will get better and better.

This mode of spread could appear analogous to missionary evangelism. Those evangelicals who try to spread Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam are, after all, concerned with changing personal belief systems. But basing analysis on the example of PRA, the self-improving self-spreading mode differs from the missionary mode in four respects:

1. empiricism. It is experiential, not metaphysical. It is based on what is found to work, not on abstract theory or theological dogma. Any theory is induced from practice.
2. diversity. It is not concerned with uniformity. It invites diversity of response. It invites and accepts rejection. This could be dismissed as a covert strategy, analogous to paradoxical psychotherapy, to induce adoption. But it is more than that. Diversity in development has a positive value (see eg. Porter et al 1991). It is good that we are different, that we have different ideas and different methods, and that different things are done in different places by different people.
3. uncertainty. It embraces uncertainty. We know that we do not know. We are dealing with conditions and processes which are unforeseeable. In such conditions, reductionist, deductive, preset solutions rarely work well. Open-ended participatory improvisation, drawing on a repertoire of methods, can work better.

4. responsibility. It places responsibility on the individual. In this respect, it resonates with successful practice in American business in the one-sentence manual of the large retailer Nordstrom (Peters 1987:378) also adopted by an Indian NGO (Krishi Gram Vikas Kendra) "Use your own best judgement at all times". Even in some spiritual contexts, a paradigm of personal choice and responsibility may be emerging, as with the question "If you were given the task of devising your own religion, what would it be like?" (Forsyth 1991:264,277). Authority and responsibility do not reside in a bible or manual, or in a ritual or set sequence of procedures, but in personal judgement and choice.

Quality assurance is, then, sought through empiricism, diversity, uncertainty and responsibility. These hang together as a paradigm, perhaps even as an ideology (For a forceful statement, see the last chapter, "More diversity for more certainty", in Development in Practice (Porter et al 1991:197-213)). Self-spreading self-improving strategies fit this paradigm through their dynamic culture of adapting, improvising, and creativity.

Conclusion: Ideas, approaches, methods and people

The potential benefits from good changes which are both self-spreading and self-improving seem in principle large. It can then be asked of ideas, approaches, methods and people: are they self-spreading and self-improving? Or do they need constant maintenance? Should self-spreading self-improving strategies be more consciously pursued by more NGOs?

In searching for answers to those questions, two forms of self-spreading and self-improving change can be identified.

The first form is ideas, approaches and methods. Many ideas are self-spreading. Ideas and knowledge of experiences know few boundaries, and fewer now than ever before. Sometimes, as with participatory mapping (Mascarenhas and Kumar 1991), all people need is to hear an idea about something to do, and they then go off and invent their own manifestation of it. Other approaches and methods of NGOs often spread fast and well. The savings and credit groups of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh may be another illustration, an improbable innovation which has spread internationally, helped by the knowledge that it works.

This points to methodological innovation and sharing innovations as key activities for at least some NGOs. An NGO which develops an approach and method which then spreads to many others can count that spread among the benefits flowing from its activities. A small NGO can, in such a manner, have a very large impact.

The second form of self-spreading and self-improving change is people. A valid and vital contribution of some NGOs is socialising self-starters - people who will go off and start their own NGOs which can then in turn be generators, spreaders and improvers of methods, and socialisers of others. NGO A and NGO B might be similar in size, activities and track records, but A might develop and send out staff who started their own good NGOs, while B retained its staff. A's impact could be immeasurably greater, especially if the new NGOs were also As, generating more As in their turn.

This points to staff development, to changes in people who work in NGOs, and to what they do during their useful lives. A practical question is how training, as conducted for NGOs by the Centre for Partnership in

Development, Oslo, and as proposed through INTRAC (the International NGO Training and Research Centre) in the UK, can contribute to self-spreading and self-improving change through people.

The two forms - ideas, approaches and methods; and people - are linked. As described above, they refer to self-spread. The greater challenge is to make self-improvement a part of self-spread. Whether ideas or practices are self-improving depends not only on their nature, but also on who adopts them, with what commitment, and with what attitudes. Religions seek self-improvement through linking evangelism with repentance, confession, penance and prayer. But PRA, and other innovations from the NGO sector, are not (God, if She exists, forbid) a religion. The PRA experience though, does suggest a secular answer: to stress self-critical awareness. Can this be made integral to innovations, something in their very genes? For PRA, Appendix A is a stumble in that direction, for comment, criticism, and improvement or rejection.

Concluding questions

Self-spreading and self-improving are also associated with institutional cultures. NGOs which are strictly bounded and territorial are less likely to share, spread, adopt and improve, than those which are open and undefended. Are the latter becoming more common? If so, then self-spreading and self-improving strategies may do better in the future than in the past. Sparks spread fires where there is tinder. Can ideas, approaches and methods spread in the 1990s which could not have spread earlier because people and organisations were not ready for them?

If so, is generating self-spreading and self-improving change a better strategy now than it was, and may it become even better?

And if so, does it deserve to be considered a separate, fifth strategy for scaling up impact?

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APPENDIX A

PRA: START, STUMBLE, SELF-CORRECT, SHARE

Participatory Rural Appraisal is a label. More and more people are adopting it, and calling what they do PRA. More and more influential organisations are requesting or requiring that PRA be carried out.

This brings dangers and opportunities.

The dangers are that the label will be used or claimed for activities where behaviour and attitudes are not participatory; that these activities will do badly; and that good PRA will be discredited. There is a danger too that the demand for training in PRA will so outstrip good supply that some will claim to be PRA trainers when they have no direct personal experience of good PRA. This has already happened.

The opportunities are hard to assess but look big. Time, though, will show. Perhaps we have in good PRA one among a family of approaches for reversing centralisation, standardisation, and top-down development; and for enabling and empowering rural communities and the poor to do more of their own analysis, to take command more of their lives and resources, and to improve their wellbeing as they define it.

So what is the core of good PRA?

We should all have different answers. It is more important to ask the question, and to puzzle and puzzle about good answers, than to have one right answer. It is more important for each person and each group to invent and adapt their own approach, methods, sequences and combinations than to adopt a ready-made manual or model. Let a thousand flowers bloom (and why only a thousand?), and let them be flowers which bloom better and better, and spread their seeds.

Here is one personal set of answers. If you read them, criticise them. Reject them. Think out your own, from your own ideas and experience.

In the words of the one-sentence manual

"Use your own best judgement at all times"

The core of good PRA is in us.

It is our behaviour and attitudes.

It involves:

- * being self-aware and self-critical
- * embracing error
- * handing over the stick
- * sitting, listening and learning
- * improvising, inventing, adapting
- * using our own best judgement at all times

So we can ask:

- * who lectures? who holds the stick? whose finger wags?
- * whose knowledge, analysis and priorities count?

Ours? Theirs, as we assume them to be? Or theirs as they freely express them?

Good PRA is empowering, not extractive.

Good PRA makes mistakes, learns from them, and so is self-improving.

Good PRA spreads and improves on its own.

So START. Do not wait. Get on with it. Relax. Try things. Learn by doing. Fail forwards. Experiment. Ask - what went well? What went badly? What can we learn? How can we do better? How can we help others to do better?

Remember the three pillars

Behaviour

and

Attitudes

Methods

Sharing

Done well, PRA becomes self-improving and self-spreading: self-improving through critical awareness, embracing error, failing forwards, and learning what works; and self-spreading through sharing.

Start with behaviour and attitudes. Ours. And use the methods at once to help.

Or start with a method, and observe and reflect on your behaviour and attitudes as you use it. Relax. Listen. Keep quiet. Allow fun. Learn. And learn how to do better.

PRA is what we make of it. If you do not like it, leave it. No one will mind. It is not everyone's cup of tea. But if you like it, and use it, share it and help others to share.

PRA is not a panacea. It is a potential. For us. And through changes in us, for them.

Do you want to realise it?

Robert Chambers
5 January 1992

APPENDIX B

